



Bruce McClelland, The Arizona Daily Star

After 27 years, James Stone is seeing his nursery empire really begin to blossom

He found growth in nursery business

By Bob Christman
The Arizona Daily Star

Customers at Plant World Nurseries walk past the 10-by-15-foot redwood building as though it's nothing important, maybe a tool shed for the outlet at 8825 E. Broadway.

But inside sits company Chairman James R. "Bob" Stone, who jokes with visitors about the spartan office from which he directs Arizona's largest privately owned nursery retailer. His business grossed \$5.7 million in 1987 and has about 100 employees.

"If you think this is small, you should see our accounting office," says Stone, seated behind a steel desk with a wood-grain laminated plastic top.

The office walls are paneled and filled with shelves of family pictures and awards of excellence from suppliers. Most of the hanging space behind the desk is covered by a map showing five current and several future company locations in Tucson.

A single window, framed with white fish-net curtains, looks out over rows of plantings separated by neat concrete walkways.

Stone bubbles with information about a new store planned for North La Canada Drive, just north of West River Road: a 4,000-square-foot building, plus all plants, displays and parking on a single 30,000-square-foot concrete slab, self-opening doors, the works.

Employees interrupt the interview often, and an advertising salesman comes by. Stone deals with them in a friendly and what appears to be an unhurried manner, but their business is taken care of quickly and the interview continues.

"I grew up scratching and clawing," Stone says in explaining his penchant for knowing "where the last dollar came from and where the next one is going."

"My parents were itinerant farmers until they landed in a small town about 40 miles northeast of Kansas City on the Missouri River. When I was 13, my father died of a cerebral hemorrhage and my mother had a heart attack — all within a short time.

"I come from a family of nine children, and my younger brother and sister were taken in by other family members," he said. But Stone was left to fend for himself.

"A friend and I hitchhiked to Craig, Colorado," he continued. "We arrived there on Good Friday, and we stayed in a small room with a concrete floor behind the local volunteer fire department until the town marshal found us the following Monday.

"Except for one sandwich and a cup of coffee that my friend and I shared, we had no food for that period. The marshal got me a job sweeping streets and my friend was a dishwasher in a restaur-

rant," he said. "I did sheep ranching, hay baling, anything I could do to stay alive. I went many a day without food. It made me very conservative, a Depression philosophy about things."

After a stint in the Marine Corps, he married his wife, Joan, in 1948 and worked as a clerk in the tobacco department of a Katz drugstore in Kansas City, Mo., earning \$137.50 a month.

"We didn't have a damned dime," Stone recalls. "I had one shirt and Joan washed it every night so I could wear it the next day."

But his entry into drugstores provided an introduction into the nursery business, because the stores always had a sideline of plants.

Moving up through the ranks, Stone landed a manager's job for Payless Drugs in Albuquerque "for \$700 a month. There I was really exposed to the nursery business because they had a large nursery department.

"But my wife had been after me for years to go into business for myself. I never saw my kids. I was always working. My daughter was 3 and she wouldn't let me pick her up because she didn't know me."

"So the guy who dug peat moss for the drugstore offered to join with me in Phoenix to open nurseries.

"I grew up scratching and clawing," Stone says in explaining his penchant for knowing "where the last dollar came from and where the next one is going."

We would put in \$2,500 each. We flew to Phoenix in a DC-3 — it was a milk run that stopped in almost every town along the way."

Stone said the two selected a location on the parking lot of a store called Put and Take at 32nd Street and Thomas Road.

"That was in 1961, he said. "We were doing an awful lot of business — and losing money. Meanwhile, we opened a store at Scottsdale Road and Thomas. We couldn't even afford to buy a cash register. First National Bank wouldn't loan me anything.

"The Scottsdale Road site was a low spot, and the first Christmas the water kept washing our Christmas trees away. I was nearly out of business, so I took a coin collection with me to the newspaper and offered to let them hold the collection till Monday if they would run an ad for me over the weekend.

"The ad was two columns wide and it appeared over the weekend around Jan. 1. Business took off and I redeemed my coins on Monday. By the following September, I incorporated," he said. In the meantime, he separated from his business partner.

Stone may know how to hold onto a buck, but he is the first to admit his mistakes in the business world.

"I was so dumb," he said. "We were doing \$60,000 a month in 1962 — that's like \$500,000 a month these years. I thought we would flood the market with plants. So when a guy offered me \$100,000 for the business in November 1963 — I never saw \$100,000 before in my life — I took it."

That was the first time Stone retired, and he has attempted retirement a couple of times since.

"We thought we were really wealthy," Stone said. "I thought I'd go back to Missouri and be a gentleman farmer. And we did move to Overland Park, Kansas, a Kansas City suburb. But I got so nervous I got high blood pressure."

He was back in business again, established a location, and sales were booming in Kansas City. Yet, the snow and Kansas tornadoes got to him "and I found I loved the Southwest."

"The day school closed in 1964, we picked the kids up and came to Tucson" and opened Payless Discount Nurseries that July at South Craycroft Road and East Broadway, Stone recalled.

"We put up the building and fence that we hauled from Kansas City, and the janitor at the post office behind the store let us hook on to their water because we had no water or electricity," he said. "My wife cranked the cash register by hand, and the first day we did \$3,500 in business."

By 1967, business was going so well that Stone decided to sell the Craycroft and Broadway site and one at North First Avenue and East Grant Road. The idea of retirement crossed his mind again, but only long enough to make him nervous.

So he sold franchises for Payless Discount Nurseries in Las Vegas, Nev., and for five stores in Phoenix. When the Phoenix franchisee started telling Stone how to advertise, "I got tired of that, and I went to Nogales, Arizona, in 1970 and opened a nursery," he said. Soon Stone had a store in Sierra Vista, too.

He had to stay out of Tucson for five years because of contractual agreements when he sold the Tucson stores in 1967.

But as the clock ticked past the five-year mark, Stone was back in Tucson with a store on North Oracle Road, just three blocks from the current site at Oracle and the Rillito River. And for the first time it was Plant World Nurseries.

Later in 1972 came the 8825 E. Broadway site, and in 1973 he bought back the First and Grant site. By 1977 he opened the 1440 W. Ajo Way store, and in 1980 the store at 4545 W. Ina Road opened. For a time, the company had a sixth store at 4772 E. Grant

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Road, but that has been closed.

Stone said he has also divested himself of all interests in Las Vegas, Phoenix, Sierra Vista, and Nogales, although Sierra Vista is now included in company expansion plans, along with Marana, Green Valley and Casa Grande — and maybe another store in Tucson. And three of the five Tucson stores will be remodeled soon.

An industry magazine lists Plant World Nurseries as 49th out of the top 100 nursery retailers in the United States, based on gross sales. Stone says he would be a lot higher on the list if it did not include such general retailers as K mart, Wal-Mart, Ace Hardware, Safeway, Sears, Woolworth's, Target, Albertson's and so on.

It also upsets him a bit that people buy things at other stores, especially discount stores, and then call Plant World to ask how to use products or care for plants. Yet, those phone calls could convert the discount customer to a Plant World customer, he says.

Stone's policy is this: "If a customer comes in, and spends an hour of our time without spending a nickel, we still say 'Thank you' when the customer leaves."

He said he also believes that "the customer we serve isn't all that interested in price. Our customer is more interested in quality, service, knowledge, selection and cleanliness. You'll remember these things long after you've forgotten the price."

The past 27 years "have been a real struggle," Stone said. "But I enjoy promoting and building things. I don't enjoy the day-to-day activities, and if I

take a five-day vacation, I crawl up the wall — my wife is the same way."

Stone had only a ninth-grade education when he entered the service and got his high school equivalency certificate while in the Marines.

"I've educated myself," Stone explained. "I read everything I can get my hands on, and I ask questions and listen to people. The company has a continuing education program. We pay 100 percent of training and education for employees."

Stone said he also believes in keeping the business in the family and keeping longtime employees. His daughter, Carol Sue, is executive vice president, and her husband, Brad West, is president and general manager.

"Brad started as a carryout and cleanup guy eight years ago," Stone said. "He made good."

"My vice president of operations, Bill Martin, started when he was 17 or 18. He's now about 29. Most of my managers and assistant managers I picked up at a young age."

The business has been good for the Stones "except for our health," he said. "Twelve years ago I had a major heart attack, and that same year in 1976 I had major heart surgery. My wife had a heart attack in 1982, and another one this past January."

But get Stone out from behind the desk?

In that tiny office, he is surrounded by aerial views of his previous and current store sites, and there is a sign nearby stating: "Quitters never win; winners never quit." And he has his own adage, "If you offer quality in everything you do, you can't fail."

At age 60, Stone says, "This has been my life for 27 years, and it will be till the day I die. I'd never sell my business again — although people are offering."

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